Endgamers: A History of Accelerationism

Nick Land's breed of arcane futurists declare war on time.

Jacob Siegel
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Look at all that happened between the years 1900 and 1922: President William McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist, the Wright brothers flew the first motor-operated airplane, and Henry Ford invented the Model T car. There was a world war punctuated by a revolution in Russia. An influenza pandemic killed upwards of fifty million people. The Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires both collapsed, spawning a multitude of new nations. History moved fast.

Now compare that to the opening decades of the 21st century. Today, in the same countries that were most dynamic a hundred years ago, an over-powering feeling of stasis has taken hold. It's as if the present, cut off from the future, will not come unglued from itself.

Accelerationism is an attempt to answer the question of why the project of modernity has stalled in the post-industrial societies where capitalism and liberal democracy are most advanced. The

movement, which started in the 1990s by a small group of British philosophers, exploded in popularity over the past decade as the problem of "stuckness" went from a rarified concern to a general diagnosis shared across the political spectrum, signified by buzzwords like "neoliberalism," "late capitalism," and "liberal decadence."

According to the accelerationists, the key to pushing history out of its rut and evolving into a higher stage of planetary consciousness is to remove the guardrails of liberal democracy so capitalism can advance unimpeded by humanistic concerns. The goal is to accelerate precisely those features of technological capitalism, like automation, that appear most alienating and disruptive because only those features are powerful enough to overcome the inertia of the present. Accelerationism's leading figure, British philosopher Nick Land, distilled the idea in a 2017 essay: "There is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification."

It's hardly just philosophers who no longer see that distinction. "Accelerationist" has also become a catch-all label for a much wider franchise of ideas and groups championing technology's destructive power, exhibiting millenarian tendencies, and embracing the old Leninist maxim that "worse is better" as a means to spark a revolution.

Acceleration is the means to burn away the controls of the "human security system" so a new post-human epoch can be born and a superior artificial intelligence can take its rightful place in the evolutionary chain.

Even the name accelerationism is not a simple or straightforward statement. It was coined by the British theorist Benjamin Noys in his short, incisive 2014 book, *Malign Velocities*, to warn his fellow leftists against being seduced by the accelerationist temptation. Intended to associate the new philosophy with protofascist movements like Italian Futurism, the phrase conjured an air of speed and excitement that overshadowed any formal political critique. With its catchy new name, accelerationism rapidly spread through internet forums where a fertile subculture existed for students of theory interested in discoursing and shitposting about the crisis of modernity.

Accelerate into what, exactly? The first hard fork in accelerationism occurred over this question. For the left-accelerationists Noys was addressing, the destination is some version of Karl Marx's post-capitalist utopia. But for Land, who has always been influenced as much by Friedrich Nietzche as by Marx, and who has consistently shown that he is not interested in left-wing politics or Enlightenment humanist notions of liberty and justice, the true subject of

accelerationism is not human beings or history but intelligence itself. Acceleration is the means to burn away the controls of the "human security system" so a new post-human epoch can be born and a superior artificial intelligence can take its rightful place in the evolutionary chain.

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Society and its discontents

One measure of accelerationism's growth is the proliferation of groups adopting the label. Over the past decade, there emerged left and right accelerationists along with unconditional accelerationists who reject the political binary, "blaccelerationists" who add a racial dimension, eco-accelerationists who want to hasten capitalism's self-destruction to save the planet, white-nationalist accelerationists who dream of an end times race war, transgender accelerationists, and on and on.

Naturally, the endless splintering of acceleration creates confusion about what exactly it is. In one sense, it resembles movements of the past. Anarchism suggests a historical precedent. In its vital period in the late 19th and early 20th century, one could find an anarchist aesthetic, anarchist politics, and anarchist philosophies, which did not always harmonize. Poets, terrorists, professors, and proletarian idealists all claimed to act in the name of anarchy. But in another way, accelerationism points toward the future. It can be mixed and matched with other philosophies in endless variations because it operates as a memetic ideology, which functions principally to iterate a collective idea rather than to harness power or coordinate collective action.

It is tempting to interpret accelerationism, a movement divided between effusions of gothic inhumanism and utopian visions of a post-labor idyll, as a kind of technological Romanticism. Perhaps it operates somewhere between the metaphysical gestalt of the 18th-century Romantic movement and the narrower horizons of postwar politics. As a story big enough to explain everything, the kind of metanarrative that modernity was supposed to have wiped out, accelerationism cannot afford to be too consistent. Where pure reason fails, accelerationism provides an emotional atmosphere vast and airy enough to contain its own storms and disturbances.

Land's writings, however, remain at the center of that storm, even as they showcase a considerable range of insights and interests. The collection *Fanged Noumena* covers the philosophy of law, the nature of time, psychoanalysis, machinic desire, the Cybergothic, the rise of "Neo-China," artificial intelligence, and much else. Insomuch as Land ties these subjects together, it is through a method of occult delirium, and baroquely knotted "theory fictions" containing passages like this:

> As the death of capital recedes politically it condens- es pragmatically, sliding online as a schizotechnic resource: no longer hoped for, but used. The inter- national collapse of solidarity sociality suggests that Monopod has become addicted to commodity pro- duction. Burn-out Protestantism migrates to China.

While Land can be a captivating writer and even a cogent one at times, like much of the accelerationist canon, his ideas are incomprehensible to all but a small group of theory devotees – which means they are unlikely to be the source of the movement's broader appeal.

Aside from the ideas, which may not be the point anyway, Land has constructed a persona and style that refashion the suppressed existential terrors of life in the machine age, as a speculative performance. Why worry about humans being replaced by machines or reduced to bot-like programmability when the option exists to experience a detached pleasure in the implacable coldness of de-subjectification? As Land put it in an early essay: "Desocialization waves desolate telecommercial space, until impending human extinction becomes accessible as a dance-floor."

Very trippy, but the impulse has a provenance. The 18th-century German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel found that inside of all men's lives, "a terrible unsatisfied desire to soar into infinity." Accelerationism promises to satisfy
this yearning by speeding up into annihilation, a somewhat diminished horizon of the infinite. And yet, all the same, *it does promise to satisfy it*, and this is enough for many people.

Marx maxims

Two critical strands in the formative prehistory of accelerationism can be found in the early writing of Karl Marx. One is the idea that capitalism produces accelerating social contradictions, which generate revolutionary potential, and the other relates to the autonomy of machines.

"In general, the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive," Marx said in an 1848 speech. Free trade, Marx observed:

> Breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antag- onism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolu- tionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favor of free trade.

In the 1850s, Marx composed "The Fragment on Machines," found in his unfinished manuscript, *Grundrissehe*. There, he wrote: "The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself."

Marx's cryptic observations about the alien-like power of technological machinery would be revived in 1972, with the publication of *Anti-Oedipus* by the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a metaphysical philosopher and psychoanalyst respectively. Looking at the failures of the 1968 student revolts in Europe, and the generally ineffectual nature of leftwing politics, Deleuze and Guattari produced a work of Marxist heresy.

In a passage that Land would later describe as "citing Nietzsche to re-activate Marx," Deleuze and Guattari write:

> ... which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist "economic solution"? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not de- coded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and
>
> a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.

Deleuze and Guattari were seminal influences on the first proper accelerationist school formed in the early 1990s at the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at Warwick University in England. Along with Land, the CCRU included the cultural theorist Sadie Plant and Mark Fisher, a student of Land's who would go on to become an influential left-accelerationist and author of the book *Capitalist Realism* before taking his own life. Accounts from those who witnessed the CCRU describe the rare academic demimonde where Kabbalah, amphetamine use, jungle music, and analytic philosophy were all seen as methodologically sound.

Into the mix with Deleuze, Guattari, Nietzsche, and Marx, the CCRU added *Terminator 2*, *Blade Runner*, drum and bass music, and the cybergoth aesthetics popular in the 90s. A final key ingredient in accelerationism came from cybernetics. Developed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, cybernetics provided a unifying theory of systems governed by feedback processes that makes no necessary distinction between living and inanimate objects.

In accelerationist terms, negative feedback loops are inhibitory and attempt to enforce homeostasis within a system. Positive feedback loops are spontaneous patterns of escalating instability, generated from within a system to escape its internal equilibrium. Capitalism equals positive feedback, which equals intelligence which, in a typical Landian inversion, equals noise breaking through the static signal.

Human culture and civilization do not exist, as we might imagine, to cultivate the flourishing of intelligence but rather, according to Land, to inhibit the runaway acceleration of positive feedback. In a striking passage from his essay "Meltdown," Land pictures modernity as the arrival of a more advanced alien life form.

> The story goes like this: Earth is captured by a tech- nocapital singularity as renaissance rationalization and oceanic navigation lock into commoditization take-off. Logistically accelerating techno-economic interactivity crumbles social order in auto-sophisti- cating machine runaway. As markets learn to manufacture intelligence, politics modernizes, upgrades paranoia, and tries to get a grip.

The end of philosophy

Minus the science fiction elements, the conception of capitalism as an autonomous intelligence is clearly influenced by Land's reading of Austrian school economists. Markets appear as disembodied agents of rational calculation, accelerating over time – when they are left alone – into the process of their own evolving intelligence and autonomy.

After Warwick fizzled out and Land disappeared for a while in the early 2000's accelerationism seemed to cool off. Then in 2013, the publication of *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* jump-started the new crop of left-wing accelerationists interested in recuperating the theory's Marxist origins. The book attacked the ineffectual "folk politics" of Occupy Wall Street and technophobic localism, and advocated a return to the revolutionary power of capital.

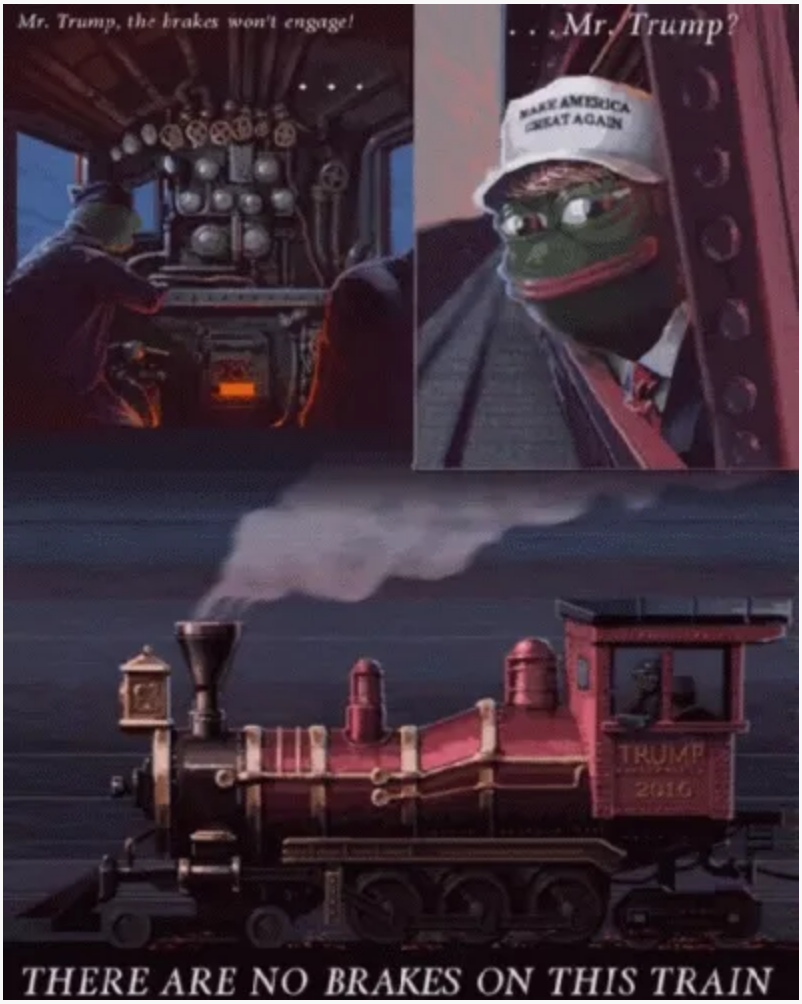
Land himself reappeared in the same year, writing a series of essays called *The Dark Enlightenment*. The essays expounded a formal political theory of "neoreaction" through an extended commentary on the writings of software engineer and political theorist, Curtis Yarvin, who was blogging at the time under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug.

"Neoreaction is Accelerationism with a flat tire," Land wrote on his blog. The case for neoreaction, he explained in a blog post on re-acceleration, is that "beside the speed machine, or industrial capitalism, there is an ever-more perfectly weighted decelerator, which gradually drains techno-economic momentum into its own expansion, as it returns the dynamic process to meta-stasis. Comically, the fabrication of this braking mechanism is proclaimed as progress. It is the Great Work of the Left."

By the 2016 US presidential election, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders were accused of accelerationist tendencies as the word seemed to become instantly popular as a synonym for any forceful opposition to the centrist status quo in liberal democracies. At the same time, something resembling Land's defense of neoreaction emerged as a motif among a segment of Trump supporters.

A popular meme from the 2016 US presidential election showed Trump reconfigured as Pepe the Frog, a bulbous avatar of the unconscious, part man, part beast, piloting a runaway train.

The action unfolds over three panels. Top left: With Trump-Pepe at the controls, a warning comes from somewhere outside the visible strip that the train's brakes won't engage. Top right: Trump-Pepe looks out the side of the speeding train with a placid grin arrayed on his green face. Final panel, bottom: Trump-Pepe has disappeared, only the locomotive is shown hurtling forward toward its unknown destination, the background is a blur of speed above the caption "THERE ARE NO BRAKES ON THIS TRAIN."



Here was an image that could be popular with both mainline Trump supporters and very online accelerationists. The former would have seen their candidate breaking out of the deadlock of a corrupt administrative technocracy, while for the latter,
the Trump-Pepe character, smiling but showing no voice or conscious volition, was the anointed catalyst for machine takeover – the train speeding away on its own in the final panel.

Notably, that accelerationist ideas appeared to gain traction in America during the first election in which Internet memes played a significant role. In fact, one explanation for the surprising growth of accelerationism as a popular ideology during this period is how generative it has been as a source of memes. While film and television are mediums for conjuring specific fantasies, memes are most effective when they touch the unconscious and render iconographically the emotional residue of ideas that calcify and lose their power when expressed in words.

One of the key concepts that Land and other early accelerationists developed in the CCRU days was hyperstition, which posits that certain fictions are aspects of the future manifesting themselves into existence. In the print age, lengthy formalist treatises manifested the consciousness of an emerging modernity. But such a thing is no longer conceivable in our own time, when philosophy is "generally considered to be of no practical significance, to have been stripped of its purpose," as the narrator observed in Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Elementary Particles*.

The comprehensive world systems developed in print in the 18th and 19th centuries would, if they were introduced today, disintegrate upon contact with the speed of the Internet. Today, a philosophy that aims to have any impact, as accelerationism surely has, must appeal to people who will never take the time to study its premises on the level of their unconscious desires.

In the strange career of accelerationism, 2019 marked a definitive turn away from inward-facing disputes and toward broader recognition. The movement's third wave of popularity, which has yet to break, associates it with a strange new constellation of hyper-violent far-right memetic ideologies.

On March 15th of 2019, a twenty-eight-year-old man armed with four rifles, two shotguns and a GoPro digital camera ambushed two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in the middle of Friday prayers. He had announced his plans earlier in a post on the messageboard 8chan prior to the attack that provided a livestream link for anyone who wanted to witness the event. The initial audience consisted of ten spectators who watched on Facebook as the killer murdered fifty-one Muslims before his video feed cut off after seventeen minutes. The video has now been banned by all the major tech platforms, so there is no way to measure how many times it has been viewed in total. We know that in the first day after the attack, Facebook reported blocking or removing 1.5 million copies of the video.

A seventy-four-page manifesto was posted online prior to the shooting. One section, three-quarters of a page in length, is devoted to *Destabilization and Accelerationism: Tactics for Victory*. Elsewhere in the document, the author declares his opposition to Muslim "invaders" as well as his concerns over climate change. He calls himself an eco-fascist and an ethnic-nationalist, and points to China as a political model. He attacks capitalism and conservatism. It is, in all, an incoherent melange of anti-modern and anti-liberal ideas familiar in the lineage of far-right terrorist movements.

The killer's idea of accelerationism amounted to something like this: extreme violence and acts of cultural subversion should be embraced insofar as they intensify antagonisms, specifically racial and ethnic conflicts caused by globalization, increasing instability until, eventually, the current society collapses, clearing the way for a new racially purified political sovereignty. It is now

possible to find thousands of people online at any moment embracing the accelerationist label while taking
it to mean something similar. Despite being the crudest theory bearing the name – by far the most recent and underdeveloped, the most intellectually disordered and purely derivative – it is now the official standard of accelerationism.

Evidence of a new militant ideology called accelerationism fed directly into the rapidly growing complex of "counter-extremist" agencies. With government agencies, media organizations, and a sprawling network of non-profit groups collaborating in the new counter-extremist apparatus that has succeeded the post-9/11 counter-terrorism establishment, thinly sourced and alarmist accounts of the new accelerationist threat could be echoed by various "experts" and media figures and quickly take on the appearance of incontrovertible facts.

In February 2020, The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness published what may be the first reference to accelerationism by a US government agency. The office's "Terrorism Threat Assessment" characterized accelerationism as "a longstanding theory that Western governments are corrupt and their demise should be accelerated through political tensions to create radical social change." Two months later, the Foreign Policy Research Insitute published a paper declaring accelerationism "the most inherently violent and dangerous ideology circulating in the global white supremacist extremist movement."

Speeding towards oblivion

In July 2021, the House Committee on Homeland Security held a Congressional hearing "assessing the threat from accelerationism and militia extremists." In a column from August of that year, *The Washington Post*'s Jennifer Rubin, citing a Brookings Institution report on Accelerationism, declared the then-president of the United States, Donald Trump, the ultimate accelerationist. "Trump is using an age-old tactic of white supremacists called 'acceleration,'" wrote MSNBC host Joy-Ann Reid, tweeting Rubin's column to her two million followers.

Land has always disavowed the racialist violence of the far right as only another humanistic delusion. In the wake of Christchurch, notable left-wing accelerationists and even left critics of acceleration like Noys felt compelled to defend him, though not without some qualifications.

Matt Colquhoun, a writer aligned with the left-accelerationist school, and author of a recent book on the life and work of the original CCRU member Mark Fisher, reflected on his blog days after the shooting.

> As complete as the imageboard bastardisation of accelerationism is, the call to "exacerbate schism" in the social sphere is nonetheless in line with some of Nick Land's more recent

> writings. But then, wasn't that Mark's [Fisher's] position to some extent too? Wasn't his call to reweird the world articulating the same thing – albeit semiotically rather than through direct and violent action? (Not that Land has ever advocated for violence – that seems to be the central innovation of the image- board contingent.)

These were interesting questions but irrelevant to the classification of accelerationism by state security agencies and their enforcers. In the end, it seemed, the very human security system that accelerationism was supposed to destroy, had reappeared in its most grim bureaucratic form, using accelerationist memes as fuel for its own growth.

That accelerationism is at once a project of supreme technological optimism, and an extended discourse in the most unflinching antihumanism imaginable should serve as a challenge to consider what these nominal opposites may have in common.

"In philosophical terms, the deep problem of acceleration is transcendental. It describes an absolute horizon – and one that is closing in," Land wrote
in 2017. "Thinking takes time, and accelerationism suggests we're running out of time to think that through, if we haven't already." It sounds like something one might hear from a climate activist. We are going on more than a century now of the environmental movement's doomsday predictions being disproved and then reborn in ceaseless succession.

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When read literally and leisurely, it's hard to take seriously Land's warning from four years earlier that time to think is running out. If the technological singularity is inevitable, then time has already run out. If instead, Land means only that the collapsing time horizon demands immediate action, it is merely banal: a restatement of YOLO for anti-human Deleuzian hyperstitionists. Where the statement comes alive is precisely at the level of human desire. Land palpably wants time to be running out, a sentiment shared by millions of people – perhaps billions if we count all the desires from the past and future as well.

But what if time is not running out? What if, instead, the human problem, which our faith in machine velocity can only blur, is that we have too much time and no way to know where it leads?

A guest post by

Jacob Siegel

Editor, The Scroll. Senior writer, Tablet Magazine.

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